THE SYSTEM D

A Survival Manual for the Living on Borrowed Time

GAËL

That day, I told myself: I'm going to die.
It wasn't on the agenda. And yet, there it is.
Or not.
I'm still breathing — that's a technical detail.

Perhaps these lines will never be read.
Perhaps they are for you, little scarab.
So you know that even in the crack, there is light.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This book is not a self-help manual.

It is the minutes of a man who learned to be happy against the current.

Geographer, automation engineer, computer scientist — and above all, a survivor.

Since he was 23, his body has been a battlefield. An incurable disease, an invisible fight, daily.

His legitimacy is not on a parchment. It is in the chaos itself.

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— CHAPTER ONE —

The Golden Rule

Never mortgage your freedom

I have never had a debt. Never. Not a single cent borrowed from a bank. Not for a roof, not for a car, not for a degree. Not even for a plane ticket. In a world that lives on credit, I am a statistical anomaly.

This sobriety was not always an elegant posture. There were dark periods — months when my diet came down to a bowl of white rice, every day, alone facing my welfare check, with the sole obsession of not worrying my parents. The temptation was there, constant, burning: pick up the phone, ask for a hundred euros, just to breathe a little. I held firm. Because a debt always ends up being called in. If not by your banker, then by your own conscience.

You always end up paying. One way or another. With the interest of guilt.

Nothing is more precious than the absolute freedom to look anyone in the eye. Nothing is more vital than preserving the trust of those you love.

That said, don't be mistaken. Don't fall into the stupid pride of the martyr. If you are down and a hand reaches out, take it. There is nothing crueler than imposing the spectacle of your own decline on those who love you.

Total self-sufficiency is a myth for fragile egos. Nobody succeeds alone. Just be aware — with sharp awareness — of the real value of what you receive.

— CHAPTER TWO —

The Dopamine Hack

Tactical Sobriety

Andrew Huberman, the Stanford neuroscientist, explains the trap perfectly: homeostasis. Our brain is a machine that adapts to comfort. The more you live in luxury, the higher your pleasure threshold rises, until nothing makes you vibrate anymore. It's a slow death by saturation.

The water heater experiment

One day, my water heater gave up. In reality, it was nothing: a simple three-cent fuse. I bought the replacement part, placed it in plain sight on the switch, and did not install it.

It wasn't procrastination. It was a social experiment on my own body. I wanted to see how long it would take me to hack my resistance to cold.

Spoiler: you never really get used to ice-cold water biting your skin in the morning. But three fascinating phenomena occurred.

Raw efficiency, first. My energy consumption dropped dramatically. My wallet breathed easier. Then, desensitization: what was torture on the first day became a bearable routine. The brain learns to silence the panic signal.

And finally — the most precious — rediscovered ecstasy. Once a week, I took a hot shower at my girlfriend's place. It was no longer just a shower. It was a transcendent experience, an absolute luxury that I savored with an intensity no billionaire could ever understand in their jacuzzi.

Sobriety is the reset button for your happiness.

When you live soberly, you recalibrate your receptors. Small, irregular pleasures are no longer entitlements — they are epiphanies.

— CHAPTER THREE —

The Shadow of Kérichen

At seventeen, survival is a matter of luck. Mine depended on a frequently absent art teacher and a door left ajar.

Maël and I skipped school. We ran down Kérichen park, skirted along the Belle Époque neighborhood, and ended up colliding head-on with reality. Reality, that day, had the face of two guys who weren't looking for a conversation.

They started tailing Maël's heels. My friend had a limp — he was the designated prey. I made him step behind me, taking his place in the line of fire.

— After you, please.

Bad move. The two bastards were out looking for a fight. I understood that dialogue was dead.

I was not a warrior. I just had a few basics of judo and the instinct not to die. I managed to neutralize the leader, keep him in check while watching the second one from the corner of my eye. Good thing I did. Seeing his boss struggling to knock me out, the little bastard pulled a blade.

At that moment, time stretches. You gain seconds, you pray, you calculate the angle of the steel.

And then, the miracle. A group of guys burst out of nowhere — the BAC, probably. The first one, a stocky guy, shaved head, dark complexion, fixed me with his eyes:

— Who are you?

The answer came out on its own, a survival reflex straight from the Odyssey:

— Me? Nobody. I'm already gone.

And I ran. I sprinted until my lungs burned. I felt no shame. Shame is a luxury of the survivor.

Never judge a book by its cover. Heroes often look like nobody.

· INTERLUDE ·

Shadow Diplomacy

Knowing when to stay silent

In Transnistria, you're never really just a tourist.

It's a state that doesn't officially exist — wedged between Moldova and Ukraine, still Soviet in its bones. Red flags, portrait of Lenin, young official guides who smile too neatly. We had crossed the checkpoint like entering a living museum. Except that in this museum, we were being watched.

There was a Sami woman in the group. Maya. Courageous, direct, not the type to swallow what she thinks. She saw a photo of Putin on a wall and said something in Finnish.

I don't know Finnish. But the tone was universal.

The guides heard. They pretended not to understand — and it was precisely that pretending which put me on alert. Someone who truly doesn't understand reacts differently. These men knew. They were doing us a favor.

I quietly pulled Maya aside.

I didn't tell her she was wrong to be outraged. I told her I understood — the Winter War, the Finns against the Russians in '40, the courage, the dead, the neutrality chosen out of mistrust, not cowardice. That for a Sami woman, the border with everything that entails was not abstract.

She listened.

Then I said the only thing that really mattered: here, we are guests. Guests behave accordingly. Even if you don't like the house. Even if you disagree with what's on the walls.

She understood. Maya was not stupid — she was outraged. That's different.

The next morning, we were in the local newspaper. Photo, article, the smiling foreign visitors. No one had warned us. They had been watching us since the checkpoint.

Maya, in the newspaper: smiling. Like everyone else.

When you're the foreigner somewhere, you owe twice as much respect to the place that welcomes you. Even if you disagree. Especially if you disagree.

· INTERLUDE ·

The Combat Mistake

On the price of good intentions

I was twenty-six and had a Laguiole in my pocket. That's a detail that matters for what follows.

In Moldova, in the group of volunteers, there was Anna — a German girl, twenty years old, looking fragile. And Marek, a twenty-seven-year-old Pole, cunning as a fox. I watched him getting Anna drunk and drew my conclusions.

Before entering the club, there was a check. Marek hid something in the snow. A knife. I did the same with my Laguiole. He seemed surprised — I didn't look like the type to carry a knife. That's often an advantage.

When the tension rose inside, I explained my point of view to Marek. Calmly. Well — relatively. I didn't want to hurt him, so I put my fist through a metal door. Message received. That Anna was not alone.

Anna looked uncomfortable. Not relieved. Uncomfortable.

The next day, Marek arrived with two bottles of vodka as an offering. We sat down, we talked. And then reality hit me with the delicacy of a cinderblock.

One: Anna was not in danger. Two: she genuinely wanted to spend the night with Marek. Three: he hadn't been getting her drunk. Four: it was him who was wary of me.

I had put my fist through a metal door to protect a girl who just wanted to sleep with the Pole.

Anna spent the night with Marek. They were both delighted. I had a slightly bleeding hand and two good bottles of vodka.

Sometimes you're wrong. Better to laugh about it. It makes great stories.

· INTERLUDE ·

The Twenty Bucks

On the price of doubt

Last night I gave twenty euros to a man who was begging. I had no coins. The logic was clear.

He told me about his baby. That he lived near La Chamande. It was probably false. Probably to score drugs. I knew that when I handed over the bill.

But I had thought about the price of baby formula at the pharmacy. It's outrageously expensive, baby formula. Truly scandalous.

One baby in two existed. What if it was that one.

I have Air Liquide behind me. I could absorb twenty euros. The baby couldn't absorb much.

This isn't naivety. It's a calculation. The probability that the baby existed multiplied by the cost of my mistake if I was wrong — against the certainty of walking past if I was right. The second scenario cost me nothing financially and everything else.

The baby probably didn't exist. But what if he did.

That was enough.

— CHAPTER FOUR —

The Bay of Lemons Protocol

— Gaël, your geography degree is worthless without competitive exams. And given your health, you're unemployable.

That's the kind of sentence that cuts your legs out from under you. I had just returned from an end-of-Master's internship in Nouméa, an experience that had drained me physically and mentally. I was at a standstill, the label 'expired' stamped on my forehead.

In those moments, you have two choices: accept the sentence, or hack your own reality.

In Nouméa, I had been fascinated by a young woman. I watched her run, unflappable, from the city's tallest tower all the way to the Bay of Lemons. She had that silent discipline, that slow but invincible rhythm. It wasn't her body I envied — it was her routine.

Back in my Breton countryside, I decided to impose on myself a law that no one could take away. For six months, I transformed my neighbors' field into my personal arena. Every day. Without exception. I followed the hedgerows, negotiated with the holes, stumbled over the bumps. It was thankless, muddy, far from glamorous.

After six months, the physical pain evaporated. But the real gain wasn't muscular. I had obtained the irrefutable proof I was looking for: I was capable of imposing an iron routine on myself as soon as my motivation was engaged.

The medical diagnosis and administrative failures no longer mattered. I was ready.

I left again. For Moldova.

— CHAPTER FIVE —

The Myth of the Network and the Reality of Blood

"You become the average of the five people you spend the most time with."

That's the mantra every business coach hammers at you on social media. Cialdini proved it: we are biologically programmed to appreciate those who resemble us. So the advice is simple — surround yourself with winners, opportunities, useful people.

It's excellent advice for your career. It's a disastrous recipe for your soul.

Network vs Tribe

Your network is an artificial construct, based on the exchange of services. And like any artificial construct, it collapses at the first earthquake. When illness strikes, when the account hits zero, your network decomposes with remarkable speed. Opportunities fly away, and those who resembled you so much no longer recognize you.

That's where life does the sorting for you. It eliminates the noise to leave only the signal — the loyal people. Those who are truly good-hearted.

Think of those who reached out to you when they had absolutely nothing to gain from it. Whether they were powerful or broke, it doesn't matter. If their intention toward you was pure, they are your real capital.

Reward kindness, not usefulness.

The System D isn't just about hacking banks or water heaters. It's about knowing who will still be there when the lights go out. Never confuse your circumstantial allies with your brothers in arms.

— CHAPTER SIX —

The Shadow Warrior

In Nouméa, I was immersed in a public administration. Surrounded by brilliant minds, dazzling CVs whose titles would have made any ambitious young professional green with envy. In that kind of microcosm, the tacit rule is to look upward toward the top of the pyramid.

Yet my anchor point, my true mentor, was not a senior civil servant. He was a man of the shadows, a category-C civil servant with only a bachelor's degree to his name. He lived with a humility that bordered on anonymity.

But beneath the bureaucrat's suit hid something else entirely: a former RIMaP reservist, an ex-boxer, one of those Wallisian men who had grown up rubbing against a reality that the administration's degree-holders would only ever see in police reports.

There was a fascinating detail about him: for a Wallisian man, he was considered 'small.' This statistical anomaly had forced him to develop a strength that size cannot give — the humility of a fighter.

It was alongside this discreet warrior that I learned resilience through kindness. He taught me a simple but vital protocol: no matter your knowledge, your title, or the medals pinned to your lapel, your only duty is to respect those who extend a hand expecting nothing in return.

Today, when my days turn into a battlefield or when the silence grows too loud, I send him a message. A few words tossed across the ocean. And often, in reply, I receive a little video from my comrade on the other side of the world.

True mentors can be at the top, at the bottom, or in the middle — it doesn't matter. What sets them apart is that they have the generosity to offer you what they have: their experience, their kindness, and sometimes, when you're lucky, a little wisdom.

— CHAPTER SEVEN —

Never Do Good to Feed Your Ego

I have often been saved by the most fragile — those who give without calculating because they know the price of lack. But one must face the truth: suffering is not always a school of virtue. For some, the harshness of the world learned too early doesn't forge a heart. It polishes armor.

During what I call my 'second youth,' while I was killing time in the electric darkness of a club, I witnessed a surreal scene. A dealer well over six feet tall was negotiating ketamine with an art student. I knew the girl from a distance. I knew she had come out of the foster system, that she had no one.

Pushed by an almost messianic protective instinct, I did what seemed right: I went to confront the guy. He was no amateur. He didn't fear a scene. We began a strange ballet, a nervous yo-yo — I moved closer, he threatened me, I stepped back for my safety before going back in.

The shock didn't come from the dealer. It came from the girl. No gratitude. No support. She wasn't desperate, she wasn't a victim. I realized, with brutal lucidity, that she wasn't buying to consume — but for her own business. In wanting to 'save' her, I was simply sabotaging her revenue stream.

The bartender ended the scene by pulling a baseball bat from under the counter.

— I'm not paid enough to play security.

I never went back there.

Don't do things out of blind idealism, or reality will break your heart. Do them because they seem right at that particular moment. That way, in the face of ingratitude, you won't be disappointed — you'll simply be momentarily annoyed.

· INTERLUDE ·

The Law of Proximity

She could have been your aunt. That's at least what I vaguely hoped, to put a word on this strange bond. She was a historian, then a journalist, before ending up in communications. I loved her badly, very badly, almost to the point of destruction. She was never alone, and in my mind, I had all the time in the world. History was going to prove me wrong on every count.

Since she was never alone, I unconsciously applied what Jack Schafer modeled in The Like Switch. I played the proximity card. I saw her more and more often, for longer and longer. Our meetings grew in intensity until the apogee. It was precision mechanics, and it lasted months.

Then, I left for Nantes.

She dumped me for the second time. I waited for her a long time, but she never came back.

The lesson is of brutal simplicity: people don't resemble you. Believing a relationship will last because you are happy means nothing. It's a beginner's mistake, a perception bias. If the other person isn't happy, they will slam the door, regardless of the strength of your feelings.

Listen not to what you feel, but to what the other person projects.

· INTERLUDE ·

The Fake Summit

Unearned favors don't taste the same

I was sitting among the GIGN unit members, the Koniambo mine operatives. I was eating a sandwich right next to them. They knew I was there, but they didn't register me. To them, I was just the High Commissioner's intern placed at their table, as insignificant as a chair.

The High Commissioner had taken me under his wing. I was attending the speech of George Pau-Langevin, the Overseas Minister. A few hours earlier, I had been in the belly of a CASA aircraft, two or three meters from her, en route to the Loyalty Islands. As a geography student, I had reached the ceiling. This was the summit, the thing you only experience once.

The medical diagnosis hadn't come yet. I hadn't yet seen the doctor who would change everything, but I already felt the machine coming off the rails. And there, among the GIGN men, I wondered: 'What am I doing here?'

I didn't feel I belonged. I hadn't earned it. I thought of Beaumarchais: 'Positions, a rank... all of that makes you so proud! But what have you done to deserve it all? You took the trouble to be born.'

Since that day, I stopped using my network for free. If I don't feel I've paid the price of admission or that I'm capable of returning the favor, I ask for nothing.

Because if you don't fight for your place, you will remain an impostor. And under those conditions, the finest wine always carries an aftertaste of masquerade.

— CHAPTER EIGHT —

The Fugitive's Piggy Bank

Building Your Capital of Freedom

I was poor. Not romantic poverty — the real thing: the kind of welfare poverty where every cent is a survival decision. My father stood as guarantor for my roof. Without him, I didn't exist for the system.

Yet even in the midst of that shipwreck, I had a secret weapon: iron discipline inherited from my years as a scholarship student. While others were spending their tourist guide wages on nights out, I was feeding my piggy bank. Sometimes just the price of a coffee. Sometimes more.

The snowball effect is a physical law, not just a financial one. One day, I counted. I had 10,000 euros. For a man on welfare, that's a war chest. That's the price of independence.

The lesson of the father

I asked my father — thirty years of stock market experience under his belt. His answer was of brutal wisdom.

— If you want to get rich in the short term, give up. It's a bad idea.

He let me stew in my reflection. Then, wisdom fell:

— If you can wait years, buy shares in reliable companies. Sound, conservative stocks. Buy when blood is flowing or when prices are low. Never sell. Wait.

I didn't become the Wolf of Wall Street. But my returns today beat any moribund savings account.

Money is not there to shine. It is there so that no one can ever force me to say 'yes' when I think 'no'.

— CHAPTER NINE —

Memento Mori

The Psychology of the Bonus

We too often forget that we are all born with an expiration date engraved in our genetic code. Whether you're at the top of the social pyramid or scraping the bottom, the Reaper makes no class distinctions. She will come, and she will not negotiate.

Facing this fatality, our reptilian brain deploys two radically opposing strategies — but equally valid ones.

Hyper-Expansion: the addiction to more

This is the fight response. We want to devour the world before it devours us. We travel frantically, accumulate skills like weapons, want to climb higher. It's a race against time where we hope that by going fast enough, death will eventually lose our trail.

Radical Immersion: the sanctuary of the present

This is the adaptation response. We stop looking at the horizon to observe the texture of the ground beneath our feet. It's the art of finding electric intensity in the morning coffee or in a mundane conversation. Carpe Diem is not a t-shirt slogan — it's a mindfulness technique for hacking time.

My own descent

I was long enslaved to the first strategy. I crossed invisible borders, infiltrated secret societies, pursued women who looked at me like an insect — just for the dopamine hit of a won challenge. It was an escape. I wasn't seeking life. I was fleeing the idea of my own end.

Then the click happened: I realized that the only way to win this game was to accept that I had already lost.

I am already dead. That's where the magic happens. When you accept your status as a corpse on borrowed time, existence changes flavor. Everything that happens to you — the good, the mediocre, and even the frankly painful — becomes a bonus. A free gift you were never supposed to receive.

Don't waste your time ignoring that the thread can snap at any moment.

— CHAPTER TEN —

The Guardians of the Future

At the moment I write these words, the counter has stopped for more than 100,000 Ukrainian soldiers. One hundred thousand erased lives.

I think of this Ukraine I traveled and loved. From the electric fervor of Maidan Square to the sunny shores of Odessa, from the warm cantinas of Vinnytsia to the feverish nights of Kyiv. This country is no longer a destination — it is an open wound.

My father, a career officer, gave a small, bitter laugh when I asked him why so many mature men were heading to the front. His explanation changed my vision of filiation.

Imagine the scene. You are the father of a man who is himself a father. Your country tips into an unjust war. Your son is called to arms. If you let him go, it's you who must, day after day, explain to your grandson that his father is fighting for all of you. And it's perhaps you who will have to announce to him, one morning, that his father is never coming back.

So these men of fifty or sixty made a tragic calculation. They went to the front so that their sons wouldn't have to. They offered their present to protect the future of their grandchildren.

— CHAPTER ELEVEN —

The Shadow and the Market

Adelbert von Chamisso was no ordinary storyteller. Born French nobility, ruined by the Revolution, refugee in Germany — his country of origin become a country of exile. A man without land, without roots, without fixed belonging. He is the one who wrote The Strange Story of Peter Schlemihl.

The story is simple: a young man gives his shadow to a mysterious stranger in exchange for an inexhaustible purse. He thinks he's making a good deal. After all, what use is a shadow? It weighs nothing, it doesn't feed you.

Except that it does. In the street, people notice something abnormal before even understanding what. A detail that's off. An absence that disturbs. Mistrust precedes contempt, which precedes superstitious anger. Peter Schlemihl becomes a pariah — not because he did something wrong, but because he is missing something.

Some things have no price. Their value only appears in their absence.

When the devil returns — because he always returns — he offers to give back his shadow. The price: his soul. Peter Schlemihl refuses. He will live as a pariah, will take responsibility for his mistakes and the world's foolishness. But he will keep what cannot be traded.

I knew my own variation of this bargain. Before Amélie, I was a fairly whole person. Not perfect. Consistent. And then I discovered desire — that brutal, blind desire that convinces you the envelope is the person.

I hurt someone I loved, out of stupidity and poorly calibrated enthusiasm. That was my shadow. I let it go without measuring what it cost.

The bill arrived later, when I fell ill and she left. Her indifference, her contempt, the total absence of empathy — I could have made her carry that. I didn't. Not out of nobility. Rather because I knew I had started the game with the wrong hand.

I could have sold my soul — twisted the knife. I refused. Like Schlemihl.

Don't listen to those who tell you the past is the past. The past is still present as long as the pain is there. Pretending otherwise is amputating part of your own history.

But don't deprive yourself of living either. You can be in pain and still experience beautiful things at the same time. The two are not mutually exclusive.

The shadow is missing, yes. But the seven-league boots are still on your feet.

— CHAPTER TWELVE —

The Purgatory of Good Men

I am not just. I long experienced this as a manufacturing defect, something to correct, to conceal. I would flagellate myself in silence — gnawed by shame over my cynicism, my inner rages, those petty thoughts I admitted to no one.

That is neither virtuous nor wise. But permanent wisdom is a lie told by people who have never truly suffered. Sometimes, you have to open the valve. Let the black steam out, before the pressure cooker explodes onto those who don't deserve the shrapnel.

It is normal to be tired of trying to be good. Kindness is not a permanent state, it's a muscle that saturates. It is human to sometimes have hard, dark, or frankly shameful thoughts. What matters is not the absence of these thoughts, but the awareness of their presence. And when this fatigue overflows, when it wounds or has consequences for others, the only protocol worth anything is that of dignity: knowing how to apologize.

My last act of pettiness? I crossed paths with a man. A good guy — the type who makes no noise. Years of wearing himself out for others, reimbursed but never truly paid, sleeping in the office of his Parisian association, carrying out outreach work with the regularity of monks and the exhaustion of the damned.

But I sensed it. That rancid disenchantment that clings to the skin of people who have wanted too much to save. I know that poison — it's the poison of the social worker who no longer believes. He left armed with idealism, convinced that injecting justice would be enough to seal the cracks. He found something else: organized decay, wretchedness as a way of life, violence turned against the weakest.

The ideal cracked. Contempt was born in the rubble. The ideology still stands, but behind it, the thinking has mutated: 'They are not like me.' That's the poison of men who have given everything without receiving an echo — that cold anger of one who ends up believing you can't help someone who refuses to help themselves.

Yet something remains in him. That tenacious dignity of people who believed in something greater than themselves. The original fire — the anger against cruelty, against indignity — is not dead. It smolders. It seeks a new form.

He is a good man. Exhausted. Damaged. But good.

EPILOGUE

Stay Good

One day, my father told me a story. When he was a young naval officer, he was transporting a legionnaire. My father shared some good news with him, without any ulterior motive. To celebrate, the legionnaire immediately offered champagne to everyone present.

When you know you might die tomorrow, nothing matters more than panache and kindness.

Life is a well-organized mess. But you can stay good without being naive. Help without expecting gratitude. Give because it's right, not to feel virtuous.

Sometimes, you will feel the injustice of life. You will want to pass things on, change the world, share your sorrows to lighten your load. The reality is more prosaic: most of the time, people are so absorbed in their own existence that they will only take an interest in yours if your experience resonates directly with their own.

That's why I write this text for you, little scarab. Because I love you. Because you liked me anyway, me, your strange uncle. And because apart from a few photos, this may be all that remains of me if fate decides to interrupt me.

So, if one day you feel like you are screaming into the desert with no answer — don't hesitate to see a professional, a trained listener. There is no shame in asking for help to carry what is too heavy.

This text is my kintsugi.

Broken pieces, glued back together with gold.

So you know that even in the crack, there is light.

I ran after my life the way one runs after the moon.

Like a pilgrim fleeing his existence to reach the beyond on earth.

Like a madman.

I ran after the moon without ever truly touching it.

I believed we were thousands of stars shining with bright light,

illuminating the void.

— — —

And then I understood.

Stars are suns slowly dying.

— — —

I am afraid, imaginary friend.

I am afraid of death. I am afraid of oblivion.

We are quite a small thing, all the same.

And it is fitting to do our best with this breath of life that animates us.

But sometimes, I am tired.

— — —

I want to hold the hand of a child of my blood.

Or perhaps the blood of another, but who will call me papa.

I want to carry in my arms the woman who chose me,

protect my wounded soul.

I want to see her in her white dress, anxious and happy.

I would like one day for my aging parents

to stop worrying about me

and proudly introduce me to their friends, saying:

he suffered, but he made it.

— — —

I am neither the most handsome, nor the richest,

nor the greatest contributor to my community —

but I am an upright man.